

## Three Oracles Relating to Sarapis

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### Introduction

A short collection of three Greek verse oracles<sup>1</sup> relating to the god Sarapis have been handed down to us in manuscript, two of which are said to have been received by the philosopher Timaeus (otherwise unknown); the third may well have been gathered by the same man. A connection to Sarapis and Timaeus is not the only thing that ties them together, however. Unlike most Greek oracles, which advise individuals or communities how they should deal with particular situations, these are injunctions of a general character, addressed to any hearer or reader. I present them here for that reason, as concrete instances of the obligations that ancient texts place on us,<sup>2</sup> whether we accept their normative force or not.<sup>3</sup>

### Text<sup>4</sup>

Ἀπόλλωνος χρησμὸς Τιμαίνετῳ φιλοσόφῳ, οὗ καὶ βίος γέγραπται.

Μοίρας ἰλάσκου, θυσίαις λιτάνευε Σάραπιν·  
Αὐτὸς γὰρ μόνος καὶ τὰς Μοίρας μεθοδεύει.

Σαράπιδος χρησμὸς Τιμαίνετῳ.

Ἄγνὰς χεῖρας ἔχων καὶ νοῦν καὶ γλῶτταν ἀληθῆ  
Εἴσιθι, μὴ λοετροῖς, ἀλλὰ νόῳ καθάρως·  
Ἄρκει γὰρ θ' ὅσίοις ῥάνις ὕδατος· ἄνδρα δὲ φαῦλον  
Οὐδ' ἄν ὁ πᾶς λούσαι χεύμασιν ὠκεανός.

Σαράπιδος χρησμὸς.

Μηδὲ βιάζεσθαι παιδὸς φύσιν ἄρσενος ἄνδρα  
Εἰς αἰσχρὴν συνέλευσιν, ἐπεὶ φονοεῖκελόν ἐστι.

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<sup>1</sup> In dactylic hexameters, elegiac distichs, and hexameters again, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> See “What Is the Use of Studying Ancient Literature?”, p. 1 above.

<sup>3</sup> See “Take on the Complexion of the Dead”, p. 3 above.

<sup>44</sup> I accept the text constituted by Gustav Wolff, “Griechische orakel [sic]”, in: *Philologus* 17 (1861), pp. 551–552.

## Translation

An oracle of Apollo to Timaeonetus the philosopher, whose life has also been written.<sup>5</sup>

Propitiate the Fates; entreat Sarapis with sacrifices,  
For he alone averts even the Fates.

An oracle of Sarapis to Timaeonetus.<sup>6</sup>

Having pure hands and mind and a true tongue,  
Enter, pure not through baths but in mind,  
For a trickle of water suffices for the holy, but an evil man  
Not even the whole ocean will wash with its streams.

An oracle of Sarapis.

A man must not force the nature of a male child  
Into shameful intercourse, for this is equivalent to murder.

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<sup>5</sup> This biography is not extant, and the philosopher is not known from other sources.

<sup>6</sup> The second half of this oracle is almost identical with *Greek Anthology* 14.71, although there are some differences in wording (e.g., the terms for ‘wash’ and ‘streams’):

Χρησμός τῆς Πυθίας.

Ἄγνός εἰς τέμενος καθάρος, ξένε, δαίμονος ἔρχου  
Ψυχὴν νυμφαίου νόματος ἀψάμενος·  
Ὡς ἀγαθοῖς ἀρκεῖ βαιὴ λιβάς· ἄνδρα δὲ φαῦλον  
Οὐδ’ ἂν ὁ πᾶς νίψαι νάμασιν ὠκεανός.

An oracle of the Pythia.

Come holy (and) pure in soul to the temple of the god,  
Stranger, having touched the stream of the Nymphs,  
Since a little drop suffices for the good, but an evil man  
Not even the whole ocean will wash with its streams.

As transmitted, the first word (ἄγνός, ‘holy, chaste, pure’) does not fit the meter and is syntactically disjointed from the rest of the sentence, but I am unconvinced by the emendation ἀγνῆς, which gives the meaning, “Come pure in soul to the temple of the holy goddess.” After all, the Pythia is the priestess of the god Apollo, not a goddess in her own right. In all other respects, I follow the edition of Hermann Beckby, *Anthologia Graeca*, Ernst Heimeran Verlag 1965<sup>2</sup>, vol. 4: *Buch XII–XVI*.